

Washington, D.C. – Today, Reps. Michael E. McMahon (NY-13), Tom Rooney (FL-16) and Tom S. P. Perriello (VA-05) introduced original legislation addressing the epidemic of suicides seen in the veterans and military retirees community, particularly amongst the population returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. The bill, known as The Veterans Mental Health Screening and Assessment Act, requires returning service members to participate in mandatory and confidential one-to-one screenings with licensed mental health professionals.

Currently, the Department of Defense requires service members to fill out a mental health assessment before returning home. Unfortunately, if this subjective paper assessment is filled out honestly and indicates risk for post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury or depression, the service member may be prevented from returning home in order to ensure that the mental condition does not go untreated. The delay in returning home coupled with the stigma associated with reaching out for help to treat a mental injury prevents soldiers from being honest in their assessments. A mandatory screening for ALL service members can reduce the growing rates of suicides amongst service members while fighting this debilitating stigma.

“I am extremely proud to have introduced this critical bi-partisan legislation, along with my colleagues Reps. Rooney and Perriello. I also want to thank Rep. Bob Filner, chair of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, for his support,” said Rep. McMahon. “Our service men and women who protect each and every one of us deserve private, comprehensive medical assessments which will decrease the stigma associated with mental injuries within our Armed Forces. The U.S. Army recently reported the highest level of suicides among its soldiers in the past 30 years and we can no longer stand by and allow our veterans and military retirees to feel that suicide is the only answer.”

Rep. McMahon joined forces on this bi-partisan bill with two other freshman members of the House of Representatives – Reps. Rooney and Perriello. Rep. Rooney is a veteran and member of the House Armed Services Committee and Rep. Perriello is a member of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs.

“This bi-partisan bill is a good first step towards addressing the PTSD problems facing so many of our war fighters as they return home from Iraq and Afghanistan,” said Rep. Rooney. “All too often we hear about tragic incidents involving service members who have recently returned from battle, incidents that could be avoided. We need to make sure we address this growing problem and soldiers are able to get the necessary help they deserve. I am looking forward to working

with Reps. McMahon and Perriello and our colleagues on both sides of the aisle to move this bill and help our troops who may be suffering from PTSD.”

“With the Army reporting the highest number of soldier suicides in 28 years, we can no longer afford to keep mental health screening in the shadows,” said Rep. Perriello. “Our brave men and women in uniform, especially those serving in recent wars, deserve confidential and comprehensive medical treatment as they adjust to life back home. I’m proud to introduce this bi-partisan legislation with my colleagues because taking care of our returning troops is something both parties can agree on.”

The Veterans Mental Health Screening and Assessment Act makes provisions to allow service members to return home, despite their answers on the post-deployment re-assessment. Also, the bill requires the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs to share records in regards to both the current assessment and mandated screening, allowing for more comprehensive research to address the factors behind the high prevalence of soldier suicides.

Reps. McMahon, Rooney and Perriello intend to invite First Lady Michelle Obama to join the conversation on such an important issue facing our military families.